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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001753

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SUBJECT: WOMEN MPS RECEIVE MUCH ATTENTION, FACE MORE
CHALLENGES

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ANGUS SIMMONS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Women in the Afghan National Assembly face many challenges: political divisions, sometimes uncoordinated aid efforts, and traditional attitudes. Women are vocal and regular contributors to debate, and hold some key leadership positions, but it is unclear what their impact will be in terms of votes. While some women have begun to see the benefits of pooling resources, it will take some time before they are able to work together to draft and pass legislation on issues such as violence against women. In order to maximize support for women, however, international aid will need to become better coordinated. END SUMMARY.

Challenges

12. (SBU) In addition to facing discrimination and lack of access to resources under the Taliban and during years of civil war, women members of Parliament face several special challenges. As working women, MPs need to find education and child care for their families in a new environment. The challenge has led some women to split their families - with some husbands and some children living in their home provinces, and other children living with the MP in Kabul. Many women have stated that they were unable to attend training or other events for MPs either because the events were held at night or because of transportation difficulties. Women MPs are also facing challenges from some of their male colleagues. Although a trip by women to the US went as scheduled, a trip for ten women to Italy for training scheduled for February was canceled after conservative MPs raised objections to an all-female trip. Parliament has also debated, but not voted on, requiring women MPs travel overseas with mahrams (escorts from their family).

13. (C) While small groups of like-minded women have formed support groups, women in Parliament are currently divided into several smaller groups along regional or personality

lines. As with all other groupings in parliament, no single group can be outlined with certainty - all are in flux, with women joining and leaving or making commitments to multiple groups with high frequency. Problems range from the practical to the psychological. One obstacle that women MPs cite is a lack of trust among many women themselves. Women parliamentarians chide themselves for not listening to each other and respecting each other's rights and opinions in debate. Some of the leading women in Parliament point to the fact that right now women see each other as much as rivals as allies, in competition for support as well as perks such as trips to foreign countries. Traditional opposition to parties and a lack of understanding of the role of caucuses has also hampered efforts to organize. Political parties are viewed as one of the causes of civil war, and many MPs of both genders are hesitant to ally themselves with groups that could be perceived as a traditional party. In addition, since most parties are currently seen as support groups for individuals rather than ideology-based organizations, most MPs are hesitant to align themselves with the self-appointed leaders of certain groups. Overall, women remain focused on themselves as individuals, rather than as a group.

Donor Competition, not Coordination

14. (SBU) The great need presented by women MPs and intense interest from all sides in supporting them has led to a multitude of sometimes-competing programs to train women MPs. Most of these programs in and of themselves are very valuable, but to date little coordination has taken place between donors interested in assisting female parliamentarians, leaving little guarantee that donors are

KABUL 00001753 002 OF 003

reaching all MPs and creating confusion among them regarding the different leadership or technical training offered.

15. (U) UNIFEM is the largest donor supporting women MPs, and has developed a comprehensive two-year training program for women parliamentarians, including leadership training, caucus organization, technical assistance, and exchanges with other countries (including a trip for six women MPs to Sweden). UNIFEM, in coordination with UNDP, is also building a women's center near parliament that will provide meeting space, internet access, and perhaps secretarial support to women MPs. USAID, through its partner the State University of New York (SUNY) has complementary plans to train female MPs on more procedural matters: legislative process and advocacy. USAID is also funding a plan from the International Republican Institute (IRI) to build a women's caucus and provide training to women MPs, but it is not scheduled to begin for several months.

16. (U) There are a large number of shorter-term programs to assist women MPs as well. The National Endowment for Democracy, through the National Democratic Institute (NDI), is funding a program to create a women's caucus, which is currently separate from the UNIFEM-sponsored caucus. Afghanistan Libre, a French/Belgian NGO, sponsored several weeks of "gender budgeting" training, teaching women how to incorporate women's rights into their budget. Former Ambassador Swanee Hunt's organization offered a one-day leadership training in March, as have several other international NGOs. In addition, the French-Afghan Chamber of Commerce, with support from the US Embassy in Paris, is sponsoring a trip to France and conference for all women MPs in June.

17. (C) The effectiveness of these programs thus far has been mixed. While women MPs have cited experience gained on international trips as very beneficial, other programs have not been as well-received. The large number of disparate programs is one significant problem. For example, both NDI and UNIFEM have separate efforts to create a women's caucus. Although each employs a different methodology, both groups

have gathered only around 20 women to their caucus. Other minor conflicts have also arisen. For example, NDI sponsored budget training for the women's caucus, but through a different trainer than SUNY is using to train the rest of the budget committee. Some assistance is also premature. The gender budgeting program sponsored by Afghanistan Libre, for example, is not likely to have much of an impact in an environment where few MPs understand how a budget works at all. This has led Safora Yalkhani, an MP from Bamyan who is serving as the coordinator for the NDI caucus, to comment in frustration that the training for women MPs to date has only been symbolic - a waste of time and money. She requests longer-term courses on substantive issues rather than short-term efforts.

18. (SBU) Parliament itself has taken some steps to coordinate donor assistance - the lower house (Wolesi Jirga), for example, has created an overall training plan for all MPs. SUNY has also hired an assistant to Deputy Speaker Fawzia Koofi to serve on a six-month contract as coordinator for donor assistance. Post is currently working with Koofi and other women MPs to encourage them to develop a similar training plan for women and to only accept training offers that work in line with that plan.

Some Positive Signs Emerge

19. (U) While the challenges to organizing and effectively supporting women in Parliament are many, and formal organization efforts are only getting off the ground, several signs indicate the positive impact that aid can have. After

KABUL 00001753 003 OF 003

President Karzai proposed a cabinet consisting of 25 Ministries and only one female Minister, Parliament spent its next public session discussing the need for more women in the Cabinet. Both men and women MPs noted that there are many qualified women who could run a Ministry. The next day, a group of women MPs met with the President. According to Dilbar Nazari (WJ-Samangan), who participated in a six-person visit of women MPs to the US, she remembered the advice Secretary Rice gave during a meeting - that the most

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important thing for women to do is organize themselves - and worked with her colleagues prior to the meeting to decide who would speak during the session and what points they wanted to emphasize, so that they could make a coherent, effective presentation to Karzai.

110. (U) Within the Parliament, women MPs are treated as colleagues, sitting next to men (including more conservative male elders) in session and during more informal gatherings in the Parliament cafeteria at lunch. This in itself is a gain for women, and a sign of their acceptance, that could not be taken for granted at the inauguration of Parliament.

Comment

111. (C) Many of the women in Parliament are impressive individuals with extensive accomplishments in their prior careers, but few have any prior experience in politics. This has led to confusion by many as to what their role in parliament should be, and overly high expectations by some about what they should do and what the international community can do for them. For example, at a recent tea hosted by Post and attended by almost all women MPs, women expected everything from a US solution to conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan to a trip for themselves to the US. On the other hand, the most commonly cited benefit of international training for women MPs is that it provided them a chance to interact with members of established Parliaments, giving them a clear idea of roles and responsibilities. Understanding their role is something that can only be

learned on the job, and will resolve itself with time and experience, not necessarily training.

¶12. (C) Men in parliament share many of the same difficulties as women (lack of a legal or budget background, for example), but are not receiving as much attention in terms of aid. While men and women MPs mostly show an easy rapport in the halls of Parliament, the almost exclusive reservation of the most highly-sought-after perk (overseas trips) for women could easily backfire against women in Parliament. Aside from a trip to Dubai organized by UNDP for all MPs in the upper house of Parliament, the US is currently the only donor planning "study tours" for male members of Parliament in addition to women. In addition, USAID has geared its technical assistance to committees, taking pains to ensure that women participate in these mixed-gender programs rather than creating training just for women. Without such a focus, programs risk engendering a backlash against women MPs, rather than assisting them. END COMMENT.
Norland